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# Urban Fathers Positioning Themselves through Narrative: An Approach to Narrative Self-Construction

## **Abstract**

Many have argued that narrators can partly construct themselves when they tell autobiographical stories. For this reason, autobiographical narrative has been proposed as a therapeutic tool (Anderson 1997; Cohler 1988; White and Epston 1990), as a means to critique unjust social orders (Personal Narratives Group 1989; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Zuss 1997), and as an educational tool (Cohen 1996; Witherell and Noddings 1991). This body of work makes at least two important points. First, the 'self' is not an unchanging entity beyond the reach of everyday human action, but is something that can under some circumstances be changed with effort. Second, changing the self can happen through the social practice of narration, not just through the activity of an isolated individual.

## **Comments**

Postprint version. Published in *Discourse and Identity*, edited by Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin, Michael Bamberg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pages 315-341.

## 12

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### Urban fathers positioning themselves through narrative: an approach to narrative self-construction

*Stanton Wortham and Vivian Gadsden*

#### 12.1 Introduction

Many have argued that narrators can partly construct themselves when they tell autobiographical stories. For this reason, autobiographical narrative has been proposed as a therapeutic tool (Anderson 1997; Cohler 1988; White and Epston 1990), as a means to critique unjust social orders (Personal Narratives Group 1989; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Zuss 1997), and as an educational tool (Cohen 1996; Witherell and Noddings 1991). This body of work makes at least two important points. First, the 'self' is not an unchanging entity beyond the reach of everyday human action, but is something that can under some circumstances be changed with effort. Second, changing the self can happen through the social practice of narration, not just through the activity of an isolated individual.

Although this work on narrative self-construction promises both theoretical insight into the processes of self-construction and practical tools for changing the self, most of it has failed to provide a comprehensive account of how autobiographical narration can actually construct the self. A full account would require three components: a linguistically sophisticated account of how narrative discourse creates relevant patterns; an account of the mechanism through which these discursive patterns influence social and psychological processes; and a theory of what the self is, such that it can be partly constructed through some narrative mechanism. Most existing work on narrative self-construction includes only one or two of these components. Many rely on folk conceptions of how narrative discourse works, instead of systematic linguistic analyses

(cf. critiques in Schiffrin 1996; Wortham 2001). Many presuppose implicit or implausible mechanisms through which narration can influence the self. And many fail to offer an account of the self.

This chapter focuses on the first component of an adequate account, and touches on the second (Crapanzano 1992; Wortham 2001 and others begin to describe a complementary account of self, but there is insufficient space here). We argue that any adequate analysis of narrative self-construction must offer more complex and specific accounts of narrative and of the mechanisms through which narrative influences the self. Drawing on “positioning” theory (Bamberg 2003; Davies and Harré 1990; Wortham 2001), the chapter describes four types of narrative positioning that might potentially be relevant to self-construction. Although any one of these might in principle contribute to self-construction by itself, in practice the different types of positioning generally depend on each other. Many plausible mechanisms for narrative self-construction also involve interrelationships across these different types of narrative positioning.

The chapter applies this work in positioning theory to an autobiographical narrative told by one young, urban African-American man who became a father as a teenager. His narrative comes from a corpus of fifteen autobiographical narratives told by lower-class, urban fathers we have worked with. Our detailed analysis of one narrative explores how this narrator may be constructing himself, in part, through telling autobiographical stories. We describe one father’s narrative self-construction by analyzing how he uses various linguistic devices to position himself and by sketching how this narrative positioning might partly construct his ‘self.’ In addition to applying positioning theory to the study of narrative self-construction, the chapter also illuminates the challenges faced by young urban men as they struggle to construct themselves as good fathers in a social context that often impedes good parenting.

## 12.2 Data and methods

This chapter draws on a pilot study of urban fathers, which included individual interviews with fifteen subjects and focus group interviews with about sixty (Gadsden, Wortham and Turner 2003; Gadsden, Wortham and Wojcik 2001). The fifteen subjects were

selected from those who participated in focus groups based on their willingness, their articulateness, and the apparent richness of their stories. All of the fathers were participating in a father resource program, where they could talk to other young urban fathers and get advice from staff. They were all lower class, urban African-American men who became fathers as teenagers.

The interviewers were relatively young African-American men who were graduate students or university-based researchers. The semi-structured interviews included questions about barriers to employment, their experiences and feelings as a parent, typical interactions with their children, their experiences with their own fathers and mothers, and their relationship with the mother(s) of their children. Interviewers also left substantial space for the fathers to tell stories about their lives. Over the course of these interviews, fathers told stories about their own childhoods, their relations with their parents, their relationships with the mother(s) of their children, their own activities with their children, and their goals both for themselves and their children.

We have analyzed these interviews using techniques drawn from Bakhtin (1981c), Bamberg (2003), Labov and Waletzky (1967), Schiffrin (1996), Wortham (2001) and Wortham and Locher (1996). As shown below, these techniques allowed us to uncover four different types of "positioning" that the narrators and interviewers accomplished. Before introducing these types of positioning, however, we first need background information on these fathers' lives and on the corpus of narratives.

### 12.3 Street, home and system

In order to understand the positions adopted by interviewers and fathers in these interviews, we need to understand the types of positions made available by the cultural context. As we have described elsewhere (Gadsden, Wortham and Turner, 2003; Gadsden, Wortham and Wojcik 2001), and as described by others (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Dance 2002), these urban African-American men often presuppose three salient realms in their stories: the street, the home, and the system. We do not claim that this taxonomy captures actual behavior in all respects, just that the fathers consistently make these presuppositions in their

narratives. Whether the fathers' descriptions are accurate or not, the narrators and interviewers must take into account the fathers' common presuppositions about these three realms.

Almost all of the fathers in our study described the street as destructive, dangerous, and unproductive. Activities commonly associated with this realm included "hustlin'," "hangin' out," and "partying." A recurring theme was that life on the streets was free and unrestricted, with no responsibilities "holding one down." Several of the fathers associated the street with their youth: "I was still playin'." "I was still bein' a boy." Several of the fathers characterized their transition from the street to the home as "slowing down." Street life is "fast" and involves concern primarily for oneself, while domestic life is "slow" and involves responsibilities for others.

Almost all the fathers represented their mother's home, and their children's primary home, as protected and nurturing. The domestic realm is an environment characterized by togetherness, with families spending quality time during meals and outings. A large proportion of time in the domestic realm is dedicated to child care, with parents cooking, cleaning, feeding, and playing with their children. The urban fathers in this study characterized the home as starkly different from the street. For example, whereas street life is characterized by the desire to circumvent responsibility (and the law), in the home fathers relinquish selfish ways and sacrifice for their children. Fathers spoke of putting their children first, as their "number one priority" at home. The domestic realm also offers stability.

This sort of grounded, settled behavior at home is opposed to typical street behavior. One father compared the two realms this way:

#### Example 12.1

Responsibility...that's the number one thing to me. Responsibility because, it's like I watch some of these fathers out there that just hang on the street all day, they'll be *wishing* they could see their child, but me, on the other hand, that's my number one priority, you know, so. That's my responsibility is to deal with him and make sure *he's* all right before I go have *my* fun. That's the number one thing.

This father's response describes two key aspects associated with the home: responsibility and sacrifice. While street life is unbounded

by external controls, home life requires sacrificing one's desires in order to follow rules and live up to responsibilities. Fathers spoke of following "the rules of the house" in their own childhood homes, as well as in their interactions with their own children.

Many narrators represented the system as biased and heartless. For instance, one said:

#### Example 12.2

Dealing with the court systems is like being public enemy number one. You know, it's like sometimes they don't care to know the situation. It's just automatically. Sometimes I just think fathers get a bad rap in court. I know I been to court one time. . . my child support was in arrears. I was working. Instead of just having me maybe pay five more dollars a week, they wanted me to do community service. Which, I was working at the time so I didn't do the community service. They locked me up and charged me \$1000 for that. . . My son's mother was trying to tell them, even she was trying to be on my side and say hey, he's paying his support, he's been. . . But they didn't want to hear it. Just locked me up, you know.

This father characterizes the court system here as heartless and unproductive. They stereotype him, despite the fact that he has started to pay child support, as "public enemy number one." They also act in capricious and unproductive ways. Despite the fact that the system should want him to work and provide child support, they impose community service and lock him up, in ways that jeopardize his ability to do both. Thus the system is both unjust and ultimately self-defeating.

The fathers draw on the three realms of street, home and system in order to characterize spaces (e.g. the street corner vs. the living room), activities (e.g. hanging out vs. caring for children) and people (e.g. the drug dealer vs. the responsible father). Because these three realms are salient for them, and because their stories make these three realms salient in the interviewing situation, we can use these realms to characterize both the "voices" that they assign to characters in their narratives and the roles available to interviewers and fathers as they interact with each other.

Drawing on these three realms, almost all of the fathers in our sample present themselves as struggling with, or as having just successfully negotiated, a turning point in their lives – the transition from street to home. Their own fathers and they themselves most often lived on the street, and fathered children during this phase of

their lives. But they have now decided to become responsible fathers, to move off the street and to get deeply involved in their children's home lives. In this chapter we analyze how one young urban father narrates this transition from street to home. Our analysis has two goals. First, we model a more systematic approach to studying narrative self-construction. We illustrate how systematic tools from positioning theory can be applied to analyze the process of narrative self-construction. Second, through Robert's narrative we describe some of the challenges and opportunities facing young urban fathers in contemporary America.

## 12.4 Four layers of narrative positioning

Many, including one of us (Wortham 2000; 2001), have argued that autobiographical narrative "positions" narrators and that such positioning is crucial to narrative self-construction. We still find this a plausible claim, but we now follow Bamberg (2003) in making more careful distinctions among different types of patterns that one might call "positioning." In this chapter we illustrate how autobiographical narration can position narrators in at least four different ways. First, narrators position themselves as having experienced various narrated events in the past. Second, narrators "voice" or position people represented in their narrative, including their own various narrated selves, as recognizable types of people. Third, while voicing themselves and other characters, narrators also evaluate these voices, such that the narrator him or herself often takes a position on the types of characters represented. Fourth, through the telling of their stories, narrators position themselves interactionally with respect to their interlocutors in the storytelling event. Any one of these positionings – and perhaps other types of narrative patterns as well – could be central to narrative self-construction. A systematic account must distinguish between them and make clear how they individually or collectively contribute to narrative self-construction.

### 12.4.1 *Narrated events and voicing*

Most accounts of narrative self-construction tacitly or explicitly presuppose something like the following account: autobiographical



narrators describe themselves as having participated in certain events, and such representations have the power to construct the self. For instance, a narrator might represent him or herself as having developed from passively being a victim to actively struggling against injustice. Such narration might help accomplish a transition from passive to active in the narrator's life. This type of account focuses on what Jakobson (1971) called the "narrated event" – the events described in the narrative – as opposed to the "event of speaking," (sometimes also called the "narrating event") which is the interactional event transacted between narrator and audience.

Accounts of narrative self-construction that focus on the narrated event actually presuppose two analytically distinguishable types of positioning. The first is reference to past events, accomplished through grammatical devices like those described by Labov (Labov 1972a; Labov and Waletzky 1967). A narrator positions him or herself by referring to a series of past events that s/he participated in. The second is "voicing," through which the narrator characterizes him/herself and other narrated characters as being recognizable types of people. In practice, reference to past events and voicing of the characters in those events almost always happen together. But the tools used to analyze them differ.

In the following example, one young urban father, "Robert Banks" (RB), describes the typical morning routine at his house.

### Example 12.3

- (a) RB okay, well my typical day starts at about *five* thirty a.m.
- (b) I get up, hit the showers. I have to be at work by seven,
- (c) so I hit the shower and either *Natasha* or *I* will fix her
- (d) something to eat. fix her something to eat *before* we wake
- (e) her up, because she's hard to wake up in the morning. so,
- (f) we have to have a system. the initial wake up, then the *go*
- (g) in there and take your shower. and then the, she actually
- (h) comes *out* of the shower, then the wake-up to get your
- (i) clothes on, get ready and then go to school. we have to get
- (j) her *two* to three times in the morning before she's *actually*
- (k) awake.

By describing the sequence of events through which he helps his daughter get ready for school, Robert helps position himself as a particular kind of person. He gets up early, he has a system for accommodating his daughter's unwillingness to get up quickly, he helps take care of her food and clothes – and thus he positions himself as a responsible and accommodating parent. Note that he also uses “we” in lines (d), (f), and (i), to refer to his girlfriend and himself as they work together to help their daughter get ready for school. By referring to himself and his girlfriend in this collective way, he positions himself as part of a functioning relationship in which parents care for their child.

The positioning that Robert accomplishes in this segment depends both on reference to past events and on what Bakhtin (1981c) called “voicing.” A voice is a recognizable social type, associated with a character primarily through indexical cues in a narrative. When Robert says “we have to have a system” (at line (f)), for instance, he presupposes that he and his girlfriend are organized, planful, responsible people. His utterance indexically presupposes this voice because speakers characteristically use the expression “have a system” to describe organized, planful, responsible people. In the segment above, Robert positions himself as responsible both by describing past events in which he takes care of his daughter and by using indexical cues like “have a system” that also presuppose this voice.

As described extensively elsewhere (Wortham 2000, 2001; Wortham and Locher 1996), characters get assigned voices through various types of cues. Quoted speech, for instance, often plays an important role in voicing (Volosinov 1973). By putting words into a character's mouth, and by framing those words with a verb of speaking, the narrator has a rich opportunity to assign the character a voice. “Evaluative indexicals” – terms like “have a system” that associate characters with a recognizable type of person – also play an important role in voicing. Calling someone a “wolf,” for instance, in the context of urban environments, may voice that person as predatory and associated with the life of the streets.

Although these brief illustrations do not capture it, we must emphasize that voicing is not solely a rule-based process. Indexical cues do not normatively establish voices, because any cue can be interpreted in multiple ways. “We have a system” might presuppose

that Robert is responsible and organized, but it could also presuppose that he is obsessive. Indexical cues only come to presuppose a given voice over time, as patterns of cues collectively come to presuppose that voice. The complexity and indeterminacy of this process has been described over the last several decades by many people (e.g. Goffman 1976d; Gumperz 1982; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Silverstein 1992; Wortham, 2001).

#### 12.4.2 Evaluation

After voicing their characters, narrators themselves take a position with respect to those voices. Labov and Waletzky (1967) gave a basic account of this process, under the term “evaluation” – an account extended by Schifffrin (1996). Bakhtin describes a similar process under the term “ventriloquation.” In the following segment, Example 12.4, for instance, Robert voices his mother and then evaluates the voice.

#### Example 12.4

- (a) RB my mom, she’s just a flat out *drill* sergeant. until she
- (b) met *him*. until she met my stepfather, she was single mom
- (c) trying to make it so whereas most moms where like ooh,
- (d) little Johnny don’t do that. and then spoilin’ them rotten
- (e) to the core to where there just nothing she was *opposite*
- (f) spectrum.
- ...
- (g) this is the woman that was like,
- ...
- (h) I was second place in the spelling bee and
- (i) the girl that won was in *sixth* grade, but that’s still no
- (j) excuse. I come home with my plaque after being all but
- (k) carried off the *stage* at school. I was the *man*. second place.
- (l) I was the man.
- ...
- (m) they carried
- (n) me off the stage and this and that and this woman asked
- (o) me, why didn’t you *win*? you know what I’m saying? can I
- (p) please this woman?
- ...
- (q) this woman
- (r) was demanding and she’s a perfectionist, and she gave the
- (s) best *to* her kids and she expected the best *from* her kids.
- ...

- (t) and I think when she looks at me, she
- (u) knows that *all* the effort that she put in was *worth* it. she
- (x) knows that if there's one person in the world that she can depend on, it's *me*.

Robert voices his mother here, using evaluative indexicals like “drill sergeant” (line (a)). He contrasts her approach to parenting with mothers who just say “ooh, little Johnny don’t do that” (lines (c)–(d)). His mother was so demanding that she expressed disappointment at his second place finish in the spelling bee.

How does Robert evaluate this “drill sergeant” voice that he assigns his mother? He could lament it, or resist it, or ridicule it, or embrace it. She said “that’s no excuse” (lines (i)–(j)) when Robert placed second in the spelling bee behind an older girl. This seems a bit extreme. He also uses the phrase “this woman” to refer to her at line (q), another cue that indicates a negative evaluation. Robert seems to be evaluating his mother as too demanding a parent. But toward the end of the segment he says “she gave the best to her kids and she expected the best from her kids” (lines (r)–(s)), which gives her more credit. And he ends by saying “all the effort. . . was worth it” (line (u)). Taken together with other segments in which Robert describes his own parenting as similar to his mother’s – although a bit less extreme – these last few lines indicate that Robert evaluates his mother’s parental voice positively. It was hard on both of them, but it was for the best in the long run.

#### 12.4.3 Narrating interactions

Description of past events, voicing, and evaluation, then, can each “position” the narrator. As he describes events and voices himself and other people in his story, Robert has opportunities to position himself as a responsible parent. And while narrating these events and voices, Robert adopts a position with respect to the voices in his narrative. Robert himself evaluates his mother’s “iron fist” approach to parenting as ultimately for the best, which positions him as having a similar value system. In addition to these three, there is a fourth type of positioning.

Like all speakers, narrators inevitably interact with their audiences. Even the driest lecture is a type of interactional event, with

roles and expectations for different participants. By virtue of telling a particular story in a particular way, narrators position themselves interactionally with respect to their interlocutors. Such interactional positioning can help construct the narrator's self, if the interactional stances taken through narration become habitual. Bamberg and Marchman (1991), Gergen and Kaye (1992), Wortham (2001) and others have given such interactional accounts of narrative self-construction.

In Robert's case, he develops a particular type of relationship with the interviewer, and his position in the relationship might maintain or construct a particular kind of self for him. One type of interactional event going on throughout most of their conversation is a formal interview. Robert is a subject being paid to give information and the interviewer is a professional paid to collect that information, in the name of (applied) science. As the interview proceeds, Robert and the interviewer adopt other interactional positions as well. They struggle a bit over whether, because of his lower socioeconomic status and the stigma of early parenthood, Robert is a lower-status person than the interviewer.

A comprehensive account of narrative self-construction, then, must clearly distinguish among the types of narrative structure that might be relevant. The four types of positioning described above do not exhaust the types of narrative structure that might contribute to narrative self-construction, but they represent four important possibilities and illustrate how a more precise account is needed.

It is also important to note that the four types of positioning depend on each other. In principle, they can be analyzed as separate layers. But in any actual narrative they always occur alongside and often buttress one another. In order to voice a character, for instance, the narrator generally must describe that character as involved in narrated events; in order to evaluate a voice, the narrator must first presuppose that voice in the narrated events; in order to position him or herself interactionally in the event of speaking, the narrator generally uses patterns from all three other types of positioning. Going in the other direction, evaluation generally depends on information about the narrator and the audience members' interactional identities; voicing depends on a value system presupposed through evaluation; and the description of

past events depends on information about voices and the event of speaking (coherent denotation can only be accomplished given information about the event of speaking – cf. Hanks 1990; Jakobson 1971; Silverstein 1976).

If autobiographical narration partly constructs the self, we must specify which narrative structures are doing the work. We have argued that the four layers of narrative positioning described here, and their interconnections, constitute a useful analytic tool-kit for studying narrative structures that play a role in narrative self-construction. A full account of narrative self-construction also requires a mechanism through which narrative might influence the self. If Robert describes and/or voices himself as a responsible parent, how might this affect or effect his self? If Robert evaluates his mother's "iron fist" as a good thing, or if he interactionally positions himself as inferior to the interviewer, how might these affect his self? Analysts will clearly give different accounts of the mechanism of narrative self-construction, depending on whether they focus on narrated events and voicing, or also on evaluation and interactional positioning. Describing or voicing oneself in characteristic ways might provide seminal representations of self, if one believes that the self is primarily a matter of how one represents the self. Or description and voicing in the narrated events might provide scripts for action, if one believes that habitual actions are central to the self. Types of evaluation or interactional positioning might provide characteristic stances that the self takes toward others, if one believes that habitual ways of relating or acting are central to the self. We discuss mechanisms of narrative self-construction further below, following our more detailed analysis of Robert's narrative.

## 12.5 Robert's narrative positioning

### 12.5.1 *Narrated events*

In his narrative Robert partly constructs himself using all four types of positioning. At the level of narrated events, Robert describes his life in three phases. From birth to age five, he lived alone with his mother. Robert can remember no more than five conversations with his biological father, and he feels that he was "more or less an

afterthought” to him. When he was five, Robert’s mother got married to the man who became Robert’s adored stepfather. From age five to seventeen, home life was “joy” because his parents cared for each other and had good jobs. During this time, at age fourteen, Robert fathered his own child.

In the following segment, Example 12.5, Robert describes his relationship with his stepfather.

#### Example 12.5

- (a) RB . . . my *biological*
- (b) father, he didn’t want anything to do with me at *all*, and
- (c) then, he *adopted* me, changed my last *name*, was calling
- (d) me *son*, and then, he was *my dad*, the way I looked at it
- (e) . . .
- (f) I remember. I was *little* but I remember my
- (g) mom holding my *right* hand and him holding my *left* hand
- (h) and us walking into the courtroom, walking into the city
- (i) county building, and I came out and I said we’re a *family*
- (j) now. and he’s like yup. I remember that. I remember that.

In this episode Robert describes the creation of his new family. Note the “us” at line (h) and the “we” at line (i), which presuppose that he is a part of a family now, together with his mother and stepfather. At this point in his narrative he positions himself as having made a transition from a (potentially stigmatized) single parent family to an intact nuclear family. This positioning gets communicated in substantial part through reference to past events – which is accomplished through various grammatical forms like past tense verbs, plural first- person pronouns, etc.

At age seventeen, however, Robert’s family discovered that his stepfather was a bigamist and had been keeping two families all those years. “Everything fell to pieces,” his mother became poor, and Robert dropped out of college. He then made some bad decisions and left several jobs, such that he does not earn very much money. But at age twenty-three he nonetheless has a steady job. He also now lives with and is engaged to marry the mother of his daughter.

Robert’s narrative thus describes two central crises or challenges, each of which was precipitated by one of his mother’s men. First, she got involved with Robert’s father, who continued his life on the

street and did not contribute to the family at all. Robert and his mother overcame this challenge when she married his stepfather and they became a two-parent family. Second, after twelve years Robert and his mother discovered that his stepfather was a bigamist. They were emotionally wounded by this, and loss of the stepfather's income also meant financial hardship for them – among other things, Robert had to drop out of college and his mother lost her home. Robert has not fully recovered from this second challenge, and he has not forgiven his stepfather for the betrayal. But Robert nonetheless describes himself moving in a positive direction at this point in his life. He has a stable relationship with the mother of his child, and they are engaged to be married. He lives with and cares for his daughter. And he has a regular job.

### 12.5.2 *Voicing*

At the first layer, then, that of the narrated events described in his autobiographical narrative, Robert positions himself as someone who has overcome challenges to become a promising and responsible parent. Robert reinforces this sense of who he is at the second layer of positioning, by voicing his characters in distinctive ways. He describes and voices several characters in his story: his mother, his father, his brother, his stepfather, his daughter, his girlfriend and her family. By characterizing these people as recognizable types, Robert reinforces the sense of himself as a promising and responsible parent.

Voices presuppose types of identity that are recognized in a particular social context. As described above, the distinction between “street” and “home” is salient in the urban neighborhoods in which Robert and his peers live. As explained by Anderson (1999), people and their behavior often get characterized as either “street” or “decent” – with “decent” meaning the type of stable, responsible, rule-following behavior that characteristically takes place at “home.” A narrator like Robert, then, generally must choose whether to voice his characters as “street” or “decent.” His choices about these voices, and how he voices himself, position him in characteristic ways.

The voicing that Robert does, while describing the various characters in his story, reinforces the positioning that he accomplishes



through his description of past events. Men like his father and brother are “street.” Women like his mother, his girlfriend and his daughter are “decent.” It is painful for Robert to discuss his step-father, because this man was paradigmatically “decent” for Robert, and helped Robert construct himself as “decent,” before the revelations about his bigamy. So Robert has faced challenges from the street – and from his stepfather’s non-decent, self-centered behavior – but he has maintained his own position as a “decent” person who is now deeply involved in the prototypical “home” activity of childrearing.

Robert says only a few things about his biological father, but they suffice to voice him as completely irresponsible and uninvolved.

#### Example 12.6

- (a) RB and that’s how it was the *few* times, like I said, five
- (b) times, five conversations I had with my real pops, and he
- (c) was like, he was so cool, he could barely talk [RB changes
- (d) his voice to imitate his father. Interviewer laughs]. and it
- (e) made me uncomfortable. I’m used to, *talk* to me, I’m not *cool*.

Being out on the street, Robert’s father is concerned to be “cool” (line (c)). He was so busy being cool, in fact, that he only spoke with his son five times in his life. His male friends out on the street knew Robert’s father well. But Robert was not a part of that world.

#### Example 12.7

- (a) RB my biological father died, and they leaning all over the
- (b) casket, and they cryin’ and I’m sitting there, me, his *son*,
- (c) his *first* born and I *leaned* over the casket and it looked like
- (d) *me* with a low haircut. nothing. I’m looking around. I never
- (e) saw that many people at a funeral. that’s what just *irked*
- (f) me. it just *irks* me. *so* many people knew him and I *didn’t*.
- (g) my *mom* talks so fondly of him. *she* loved him.

Robert’s father did have connections with other men out on the street, and these men wept for him. It turns out that many of them met and respected him for his skill at basketball, a prototypical game of the streets. But Robert’s father chose to live with his friends on the street, and Robert was not a part of that world.

In contrast to Robert’s biological father, we have already described Robert’s mother above – the woman with the iron fist

who demanded a lot. She sacrificed for Robert, and she demanded a lot from him, but in the end it turned out for the best. His step-father, before his bigamy was revealed, was also a stable, responsible figure in Robert's life. Robert was proud of his family's respectability.

#### Example 12.8

- (a) RB and it's all about how you *view* yourself
- (b) and how you *view* your family. I viewed my family as *tops*
- (c) of the block, none better. I mean, the Huxtables might have
- (d) had more money, but they didn't have more *knowledge* in
- (e) their home.

Because of his stable home, Robert was able to, as he says, "do his job" and focus on succeeding in school.

So Robert voices some people in his life as "street" – his father and, as we will see below, his brother. He voices others like his mother as "decent," as acting responsibly to create a home. In addition to voicing these others, the genre of autobiographical narrative also provides narrators like Robert a chance to voice their own past selves. We have already seen indications that he voices himself as "decent," but it turns out to be more complicated than this. He has been both self-centered and responsible, but he has moved from the former toward the latter.

Robert describes himself as having undergone a developmental transition, as he has dealt with his challenges. He voices his younger self as having had some characteristics of "street" people. For instance, he was negative and refused to make an effort, and this cynicism "soured" (Example 12.9, line (e)) him in his attitudes towards others. He has changed from this earlier cynical self, however, wanting to set a better example for his daughter.

#### Example 12.9

- (a) RB but everything I *say*
- (b) and *do* and behavior, in front of her *matters*. I mean
- (c) everything, like my interaction with different types of
- (d) people, and races and colors and ethnic backgrounds and all
- (e) that stuff. I don't wanna *sour* her with what I was soured
- (f) with. then, my *temper*. I used to have a, not a short fuse. it
- (g) would take a lot to get me upset, but *once* I was upset, you
- (h) could pretty much kiss it goodbye for the evening.

- (i) there would be no communicating or even, you know.
- (j) every little decision is a *lot* more crucial, because you have
- (k) more than just *you* that you're worrying about. you can't
- (l) just *haul* off and do something wrong and that because if
- (m) you're just by yourself, only person you have to worry
- (n) about pleasing is yourself. but it's not like that.

In addition to overcoming this cynicism, Robert has also overcome his temper. He used to think only of himself, getting upset and taking it out on others. But now he realizes his responsibility to think about his daughter's needs before his own. He now operates according to the rules of the home, not the street.

In the following segment Robert not only acknowledges that he was wrong in the past, but also that this has a continuing impact on his life.

#### Example 12.10

- (a) RB whenever I would get to a point where I wasn't happy with
- (b) my *progress* in life, I automatically attached it to the *job*
- (c) that I was working at the time.
- ...
- (d) I was working
- (e) the water company, and every time I see a water company
- (f) truck drive by I'm like, *man*, you were *nineteen* years old at
- (g) the water company, could a had it *made* in the *shade* by
- (h) now. I don't know. I guess thirty five *grand* a year, I don't
- (i) know, but that's *decent* money to me. I'm a simple man.
- (j) It doesn't much to make me happy and I could a had it *made*
- (k) by now, but oh no. I wanna leave. I'm *tired*. I don't *like* that
- (l) job. I don't like how this supervisor's *talking* to me. this is
- (m) the bottom line. and I *understand* that now

Robert voices himself clearly through the quotation at lines (k)–(m). He used to be the kind of person who complains about working hard and quits a job over minor slights. Because of this, he is not making as much money as he could.

Robert continues to feel the effects of his earlier decisions to quit jobs and leave college.

#### Example 12.11

- (a) RB it
- (b) *does* kinda hurt me when I call the job line and it says that
- (c) they're hiring for this and this and this, and you must

- (d) possess a *bachelor's* degree and all of this, it kinda *hurts* me
- (e) a little bit that I don't have that. I feel that I'm *sharp*
- (f) enough to still get it if I wanted it but I don't have the *drive*
- (g) to get it anymore. I just have the *drive* to get paper and
- (h) make my ends meet.

Robert has the ability, but he does not have the "drive" to complete college (lines (d)–(g)). As he has developed, from self-centered, temperamental young man to responsible parent, Robert has also chosen a working-class life. Caring for his family is his first priority, and a job is simply a means to that end. He expects a job, not a career: "I am there for the green paper with the *eagle* on it".

### 12.5.3 Evaluation

Through the narrated events that he describes, and through the voices that he assigns to other characters and to himself, Robert communicates a sense of himself. He never was "street" himself, thanks to his mother and his stepfather. But he did face two crises when his mother's men left. And as a younger man he also thought primarily of himself. In recent years he has become a responsible parent, and he has started to put others' needs before his own.

Robert reinforces this positioning through the evaluation he does in his narrative. We can see this most clearly in the different evaluations he makes of his brother and himself.

#### Example 12.12

- (a) RB and the deal is, when you rule with an iron
- (b) *fist*, your rule is *complete*, but when your *fist* isn't *iron*
- (c) anymore, *you* no longer rule. that's why I have a *eighteen*
- (d) or *nineteen*, no Brandon's *twenty*. he was *nineteen*, just
- (e) turned *twenty*. I have a *twenty* year old brother who *barely*
- (f) listens to anything my mom says. I can't really, I can't
- (g) relate to that because when I grew up, *her* word was *rule*.
- (h) from the time, five years on. I don't know what it *was*,
- (i) *different* make up, he *never* had any *fear* in his *heart* of that
- (j) woman at *all*. ever. but maybe it was because she was he
- (k) was the *baby*. the *young* one. I know Brandon didn't do
- (l) that and this and that and blah, blah, blah.
- (m) . . .
- (m) I got the more *calloused* hand so. I guess it all worked out
- (n) for the best. except the fact that he won't *listen* to her. he
- (o) *barely* listens to me.

Robert's mother had an iron fist with him. As described above, Robert evaluates this as having been for the best. His mother behaved differently with his brother, however. Brandon was spoiled, and as a result he "won't listen" (line (n)). Later on Robert describes how his brother has turned out to be "a thug," although he is "a thug with a heart."

A "thug" lives on the street. But how does Robert evaluate this voice? He could have some sympathy for the injustices that such people face, or he could blame them for their situation. Examples like the following show that he adopts the latter position.

### Example 12.13

- (a) IVER do you *see* getting
- (b) job as a barrier?
- (c) RB no. all you gotta do is listen to the news. I mean,
- (d) unemployment is at a *all* time low in this city. I mean, all it
- (e) takes is a Sunday paper. nine times outta ten, it don't take
- (f) much. a *smile*, a Sunday paper and a *haircut* and a *belt* to
- (g) put in your belt loops. nine times out of ten you can get a
- (h) nine-dollar an hour job. it's not hard. I don't see that as a
- (i) barrier. it's a barrier when you don't want to *work*. the
- (j) *problem* is when you *want* money, but you *don't* want to
- (k) work to get it.
- ...
- (l) of course, it may be harder for some other
- (m) people, because they may *have* five, six, seven *gold* teeth,
- (n) hair in *corn* rows, *pants* sagging down, I mean, that's not
- (o) the type of English that some places. like if I had a
- (p) store and it was black owned and I'm proud to be black
- and
- (q) everything else, but you ain't going to be walking into my
- (r) store looking like a *hot* mess. you're going to *pick* your hair
- (s) out, *shape* it up, tuck your shirt in, look presentable. that's
- (t) all. that's where their problem is, that's *my* brother's
- (u) problem. he don't want to *cut* his hair, he got his *way* out to
- (v) here, and I guess that a *thing* with the young toughs or
- (w) whatever (hh). but, no, getting a job. that ain't no problem.
- (x) not for *me*.

In this segment Robert colorfully voices "street" people like his brother. They have gold teeth, distinctive haircuts, saggy pants, and they do not speak Standard English (lines (n)–(p)). Robert makes

clear his position, by calling such self-presentation a “hot mess” (line (r)). He feels that such people should make a small effort to “look presentable” (line m)). Then they could get jobs and join mainstream society.

In several similar segments, Robert negatively evaluates “street” people like his brother and his father. He positions himself as very different from such people.

#### Example 12.14

- (a) RB I couldn’t relate. I found myself not being able to
- (b) relate to guys at school because they’s like, oh, I’m living
- (c) from place to place and I’m *hustlin’* is the only way I know
- (d) to survive, I was. *my* upbringing was *storybook* up until I
- (e) hit seventeen. mom and dad huggin’ each other and it.

Although he himself has faced hardships, he cannot relate to street people who are “hustling” (lines (b)–(c)). He expresses sympathy at various points toward people who have genuine needs, but he is unsympathetic toward those who act “street.”

We can see a similar evaluation in the following segment, where Robert is describing his own responsible behavior as a child.

#### Example 12.15

- (a) RB my mother. we was talking about latch key kids and
- (b) stuff and I didn’t *know* I was a *latch* key until they actually
- (c) labeled that. I thought that was being a *responsible* young
- (d) man. not burning the house *down* while your *mother’s*
- (e) gone. fixing a ham sandwich, get some chips, turn on the
- (f) tv, wait for *mom* to get home, it’s not that hard. I found out
- (g) oh you’re latch key. *latch* key. I was like, am I? I was *latch*
- (h) key from fourth grade on, if that’s what *latch* key is.

Unlike “street” kids today, he implies, Robert himself was a “responsible young man” (lines (c)–(d)). By using this phrase here, Robert the narrator positions himself as like responsible, adult, parental figures who talk this way. He has little sympathy for “street” people and others who cannot act responsibly – as he says, “it’s not that hard” (line (f)). Through such evaluation, in this example and others, Robert positions himself as “old fashioned.” He is not cool. He is working within the system and taking care of his daughter.

#### 12.5.4 *The event of speaking*

In describing the narrated events, in voicing his characters, and in evaluating those voices, Robert adopts a consistent position for himself as someone who has become a “decent,” responsible parent. His emerging relationship with the interviewer in the narrating event reinforces this positioning.

The interviewer and Robert begin their interaction with the presupposed roles of interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer has authority to direct the conversation and Robert has an obligation to provide information. They continue in these roles throughout the conversation, but there are other possible relationships that they might also be adopting. At times, for instance, the interviewer acts sympathetic toward the difficulties that Robert has faced. On hearing about Robert’s stepfather’s bigamy, for instance, he says: “and so it was really devastating when you found out.” For most of the interview, the interviewer is primarily an interviewer, but a sympathetic one.

There is another interactional issue in play, however. The interviewer begins with the following comment:

#### Example 12.16

- (a) IVER . . . we appreciate, when I say *we*, NCOFF [National
- (b) Center on Fathers and Families], we really appreciate your
- (c) taking *your* time out of your busy schedule to come in here.
- (d) although twenty-five dollars is not a *lot*, we at least want to
- (e) show that we respect your *time*.
- (f) RB it’s like I was telling Lisa, I said *twenty-five* dollars. I
- (g) could work *half* a day to make that, so it’s plenty to *me*, so
- (h) it’s *more* than enough.
- (i) IVER oh, okay. so I’m going to start with some
- (j) background information. . .

When the interviewer apologizes for the small \$25 payment, it becomes clear that Robert and the interviewer have different socioeconomic positions. Robert responds that “it’s plenty to me” (line (g)), thus accepting the differing positions that he and the interviewer occupy. This issue of relative status remains presupposable throughout the interview. Robert and the interviewer must deal with or avoid tacit interactional questions like: Is the interviewer “better” than Robert? Does Robert admire or resent him for this?

Does the interviewer flaunt or try to minimize his socioeconomic privilege?

In the following segment, for instance, Robert engages the issue of credit and mentions the interviewer in passing.

Example 12.17

- (a) IVER how did she, and this is just an aside, how did
- (b) she deal with finding out your stepfather was a bigamist?
- (c) RB oh, man. she had a nervous breakdown. she lost her
- (d) *house*. she had to *file* bankruptcy. you don't find a whole
- (e) lot of black people, with, you may have decent credit, but
- (f) *perfect*, never had a late payment, anything. I never forget
- (g) 1986. she walked into the showroom floor and saw a
- (h) eighty-six V8 Trans Am, with *all* the trimmings, and she
- (i) walked in and she looked at it and said, I want it. and
- (j) *drove off* with the car. no money. she didn't put any money.
- (k) that's what her credit was like. a *brand* new car. just signed
- (l) for it and took it *home*.

At line (e), Robert says "you may have decent credit, but." This presupposes the question of whether Robert's mother had better credit than the interviewer, and it potentially raises the issue of relative status. If socioeconomic status is a marker of worth – and it is often taken that way in the larger society – does his mother's good credit make Robert "as good as" or "better" than the interviewer? Such questions about interactional positioning are not necessarily conscious or important to the participants in an interaction like this, but they are presupposable and thus they may become important to the interactional positions of the speakers (Goffman 1959).

It turns out that Robert is not centrally interested in asserting his own status relative to the interviewer. We can see this near the end of the interview, when the interviewer makes a bid to establish solidarity with Robert. Despite their different socioeconomic statuses, and despite the fact that he is the interviewer and has authority to direct their conversation, the interviewer shares a story from his own experience. He describes how his own father left him when he was a child, and in doing so he expresses sympathy for what Robert went through when his stepfather left.

Right before the interviewer tells this story, he jokingly describes their interaction as having been like a therapy session:



Example 12.18

- (a) IVER um, well, let's transition now out of this,
- (b) perhaps, and I hope that at least maybe it does you some
- (c) good to have someplace to talk about (hh) it.
- (d) RB talk about it. it's *easier* to talk about it because
- (e) Natasha, she *knows* my mom. you're hardly
- ever in a *forum*
- (f) where you're *asked* the questions to *prompt* discussion. it's
- (g) more like, you say something, then I say something, then
- (h) you say something, then I say something. but, it feels good.
- (i) you don't know how much, what a *weight* it feels like is
- (j) being lifted just being able to talk about this stuff. because I
- (k) *brew* on it all the time, I think about him leaving us like it
- (l) was yesterday.

Here Robert ratifies the interviewer's description of the interview as a therapy session. It feels good to "talk about this stuff" (line (j)), as one would do with a therapist. And the interview has been a therapeutic success, as it feels to Robert as if a weight "is being lifted" (lines (i)–(j)).

There are now two potential frames for the interaction: an interview and a therapy session. In what follows, the interviewer introduces a third potential frame – a sympathetic conversation among peers who have shared similar traumatic experiences with fathers who disappointed them.

Example 12.19

- (a) IVER I mean I can understand the *fresh* vision of
- (b) that occurring because my father left my home when I was
- (c) nine years old and I can remember it as if it was yesterday.
- . . .
- (d) I can see myself playing with my mail
- (e) truck, and seeing my dad coming down the stairs with his
- (f) *suitcase*, and I asked him, innocent child, dad, where you
- (g) going? I thought he was going on a vacation. he said, well,
- (h) you know son. I have to go away. and I said, well, when
- (i) you coming *back*? and he said, well, we'll talk about it. and
- (j) then when it *hit* me that he was gone, it was devastating.
- (k) like for me, fortunately, it happened at a time when, it
- (l) really changed my whole life, because then my mother
- (m) ended up sending me to military school and I never really
- (n) had that father figure. consequently I learned a lot from my
- (o) *peers*, ended up making a lot of mistakes. but I was

- (p) fortunate that by my sophomore year in college, I woke up  
 (q) and decided it was time to buckle down.  
 (r) RB see that was the thing I didn't. I wish I could have  
 (s) buckled down then. I just, by that point, I just, I said,  
 (t) forget it. but like you said, *crystal* clear. I remember the *last*  
 (u) shirt he had on, the *blue* jeans with the work look on the  
 (v) side, where he used to hang his hammer and stuff like that.  
 (w) too much.  
 . . .  
 (x) IVER yeah, and it was like, with my parents, it's  
 (y) like they lived in two different worlds. my mother lived in  
 (z) the *west* of the city, which was economically a lot better  
 (aa) off, than the *north*. and so I would go to see him, and it was  
 (bb) just different, because he liked to *drink*. he spent a lot of  
 (cc) time in the *bar*, so you know, these kinds of things.  
 (dd) RB and that's how it was the *few* times, like I said, five  
 (ee) times, five conversations I had with my real pops, and he  
 (ff) was like, he was so cool, he could barely talk [RB changes  
 (gg) his voice to imitate his father. Interviewer laughs]. and it  
 (hh) made me uncomfortable. I'm used to, *talk* to me, I'm not  
 (ii) *cool*. I think, it's *good* to get it out. like I said, I feel a lot  
 (jj) better. I feel I *handled* it extremely well, too. I gotta pat  
 (kk) myself on the back because a lesser person would have  
 (ll) crumbled. just like my *mom*, can you imagine just, you  
 (mm) being married to this man for twenty years and then you  
 (nn) wake up and you're *not* and he's *gone*? [snaps finger]  
 (oo) IVER let's transition a bit to . . .

By sharing his similar experience with Robert, the interviewer might be creating a friendly, peer-like relationship. He emphasizes the pain of his own experience, describing himself as an "innocent child" (line (f)) who went through this "devastating" experience (line (j)).

In interviewing one of the other young fathers, this same interviewer told the same story and created solidarity with him (cf. Wortham and Gadsden 2004). This other father responded to the interviewer's story by empathizing with him. They went on to finish each other's sentences while describing their shared reactions to the experience, and they thus developed both interactional synchrony and camaraderie. Because they had endured similar pain in their childhoods, they could now talk to each other as black men working to contribute as husbands and fathers. They were still interviewer and interviewee, but they had also developed some solidarity with each other.

Robert, however, responds differently to the interviewer's story. When he tells the story about his father leaving, the interviewer steps out of his role as a scientist gathering data, and he steps out of the role of therapist that he seems to have adopted earlier in the conversation with Robert. He could be more of a peer with Robert, talking like an empathic friend. But Robert does not ratify this (potential) friendly, peer-like relationship. Unlike the other father, Robert does not empathize with the interviewer. Furthermore, instead of picking up on the similarities between his experience and the interviewer's, he immediately picks up on the differences. His first response – "I wish that I could have buckled down then" at lines (r)–(s) – notes that, unlike the interviewer, he did not turn toward school and prosocial behavior after his stepfather left.

After saying this, however, Robert does note that, like the interviewer, he does remember "crystal clear" the day his stepfather left (line (t)). The interviewer takes this as an invitation to talk more about his own experience, and he goes on to describe his parents' neighborhoods and his father's drinking. This presupposes that he and Robert have established some solidarity as men who experienced similar painful experiences as children. Robert, however, cuts him off and begins talking about himself again. He changes the topic to his biological father, and he does not acknowledge the interviewer's description of his own experience. Immediately following, Robert gives some meta-commentary on the interaction he and the interviewer have been having: "it's good to get it out" (line (ii)) and "I feel a lot better" (lines (ii)–(jj)). This positions himself as a therapy client again, someone being given the opportunity to talk about his feelings. It also positions the interviewer as a therapist. If their relationship in the interview is like therapy, then the interviewer should not be sharing his own experiences as he did – he should be listening to Robert's problems.

The interviewer, then, made a bid to change the event of speaking from an interview, and perhaps also from a therapy session, into a sympathetic conversation between peers discussing similar traumatic experiences. Robert, however, shifts it back into a quasi-therapeutic event. As he did with his earlier response about \$25 being a lot of money, Robert actively positions himself as lower

status than the interviewer and as benefiting from the interviewer's help.

This interactional positioning fits with the other sorts of positioning that Robert has done. He does not challenge power structures, as "street" people do. He works within the system, focusing on doing his job and caring for his family. Thus he is not interested in being the interviewer's friend, and he does not care to establish solidarity with him. He is happy to position himself as subordinate to the interviewer, and to benefit from this positioning by having a quasi-therapy session in which he gets to discuss his own problems.

## 12.6 Conclusions

All four types of positioning work in concert in Robert's narrative, to construct him as a responsible parent who distances himself from the street and embraces his domestic responsibilities. He describes himself in the narrated events as having overcome the challenges raised by his father's and stepfather's irresponsible behavior, to become a good parent for his daughter. He voices most of the men in his narrative, like his father and his brother, as living on the street. But he voices himself as having developed from irresponsible to responsible, as a "decent" person who takes responsibility in the domestic sphere. He evaluates "street" people negatively, as lazy, selfish and incompetent, and he embraces a more "old-fashioned" identity for himself. As Robert evaluates things, it's best not to be cool. Finally, interactionally, Robert positions himself as lower status than the interviewer, as someone who is comfortable with his working-class identity. Instead of being concerned with status and resenting people like the interviewer who represent the system, Robert takes what they have to offer and concentrates on being a responsible parent and domestic partner.

By constructing himself in this way, using all four types of positioning, Robert is artfully struggling with a challenge faced by the young urban fathers in our sample. The street and the home are gendered domains. Men stereotypically gain status as Robert's biological father did. They win respect on the street by fighting,

being loyal to friends and playing ball (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois 1995; Dance 2002; Ferguson 2000). Women stereotypically gain status by being good mothers, maintaining a nurturing domestic space for their children. Young fathers like Robert – under pressure from government and their own paternal urges to care for their children – are pushed toward the stereotypically female domestic realm. But to leave the street and participate in home life can threaten their status as men. Robert's response is to position himself explicitly as "not cool," as not concerned to prove himself according to the values of the street, but instead concerned to embrace an identity as an "old fashioned" man who values domestic responsibility. The interview itself seems to offer him an opportunity to articulate this identity, in the company of another man who rejects the values of the street.

In Robert's case, the four layers of narrative positioning work together, to create a more coherent sense of who he is. How he describes and voices himself, how he evaluates others' voices, and how he interacts with the interviewer all work together to position him as an "old fashioned" responsible parent and domestic partner. In some other narratives, although not in Robert's, this sort of synergy across levels happens in an even more robust way. Wortham (2001), for instance, describes an autobiographical narrative which involves elaborate parallelism between the events described and the positions enacted. In this case the narrator represents herself as going through a developmental transition (from passive to active) in the narrated events, and she simultaneously enacts a parallel transition in her interaction with the interviewer. Such parallelism represents a more complex type of interconnection among the various types of positioning than we see in Robert's narrative. Wortham (2001; 2003) argues that this sort of parallelism can constitute a mechanism that connects narrative structures to a self that is partly transformed through narration.

The various layers of narrative positioning need not work together, however. A narrator might, for instance, describe and voice herself as warm and sympathetic, while interactionally positioning herself as short-tempered and hostile in the event of speaking. This might construct a contradictory, or at least complex, sense of self for her. More work needs to be done on how different mechanisms of narrative self-construction work. But whatever the

mechanism, analyses of narrative self-construction must attend systematically to at least the four layers of positioning we have outlined.

## Appendix 12.1 Transcription Conventions

- abrupt breaks or stops (if several, stammering)
- ? rising intonation
- . falling intonation
- ITALICS *stress*
- 1.0 silences, timed to the nearest second
- [ indicates simultaneous talk by two speakers, with one utterance represented on top of the other and the moment of overlap marked by left brackets
- = interruption or next utterance following immediately, or continuous talk represented on separate lines because of need to represent overlapping comment on intervening line
- [...] transcriber comment
- : elongated vowel
- °...° segment quieter than surrounding talk
- , pause or breath without marked intonation
- (HH) laughter breaking into words while speaking

